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ABSTRACT

Differences in 4- and 6-year-old children's perceptions of their inner social circle, their major sources of emotional and problem solving support, their reasons for choosing a particular source of support, and the types of behaviors they view as supportive in various stressful situations were studied. Mother, father, siblings, grandparents, teachers, other adults outside the household, and peers at school and in the neighborhood were investigated as sources of support. A total of 24 children 4 years of age and 29 public school students 6 years of age were asked to think of all the people they knew at home, in the neighborhood, and at school, and any relatives or friends who lived far away. They were then asked to name the people who were "very special" to them. Hypothetical stories about stressful or problematic situations common to young children were then presented. In each, subjects were asked who would help them feel better by providing emotional support, or help them solve the problem by providing problem solving support. They were also asked why they would turn to each individual and what that person would do to help. Dolls were used as concrete props children could manipulate and speak through. Analysis of variance showed that 6-year-olds and girls named more special others than did 4-year-olds and boys. For support, parents and peers figured most prominently at both ages. Results suggest that peers are perceived as a significant source of support for children, even when they are as young as 4 years of age. (Author/RH)

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Developmental Differences in Young Chidren's Perceptions of Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Developmental Differences in Young Children's Perceptions of Social Support

Research into the social networks of adults has demonstrated that a person's perceptions of the support they receive from their network can buffer the effects of stress (Brown & Harris, 1978; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). While there is recent evidence of developmental changes in social networks and perceptions of support from middle childhood to adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), little is known about changes in young children's perceptions of their social networks and resources for social support.

This study investigated differences in four- and six-year-old children's perceptions of their inner social circle, their major sources of emotional and problem solving support, their reasons for choosing a particular source of support, and the types of behaviors they view as supportive in various stressful situations. The following sources of support were investigated: mother, father, siblings, grandparents, teachers, other adults outside the household, peers at school and peers in the neighborhood.

Twenty-four 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool programs and twenty-nine 6-year-olds in public schools were interviewed in two separate home visits conducted approximately one week apart. To assess the child's social network, children were first asked to think of all the people they knew at home, in the neighborhood, at school, and any relatives or friends who lived far away. They were then asked to

name the people who were "very special" to them. Hypothetical stories about stressful or problematic situations common to young children were then presented. In each, they were asked who would help them feel better (emotional support) or help them solve the problem (problem solving support). They were also asked why they would turn to each individual and what that person would do to help. Dolls were used as concrete props children could manipulate and talk through.

Analysis of variance showed that six-year-olds and girls named more special others than did 4-year-olds and boys. For support, parents and peers figured most prominently at both ages. At age 4, peers were viewed as most important for emotional support, parents for problem solving support. At age 6, children increased in their view of mother as a source of emotional support while father remained the same. Peers remained an important source of emotional support at this age, with some noted sex differences. Also at age 6, other adults outside of the household (neighbors, extended relatives) were more frequently mentioned than at age 4.

These results suggest that peers are perceived as a significant source of support for children, even as young as age four. Therefore, we may need to revise our view of the young child as wholly dependent on the family for support. Developmental shifts in perceptions of support are discussed in relation to shifts in developmental tasks that children must master as they progress from early to middle childhood.

Introduction

Social support, or the perception that others care for you and that you can turn to them for help, has been shown to be important to health and to the ability to deal with stress. Most of the research in this area has been conducted with adults. However, recently, research has extended to middle childhood and adolescence. This research has found that, in general, parents and peer friendships are children's most important sources of support. Same-sex friendships, in particular play increasingly important roles with age. Although parents remain a critical source of support, their influence decreases as the influence of peers increases.

However, few studies have examined social support in young children. Certainly, parents would be expected to play a primary role. But what of the role of peers at this age? Can young children give and receive support in their peer friendships? Research and theory on young children's friendship conceptions suggests that young children's friendships are momentary, based on physical proximity and positive interaction without a sense of enduring relation. As such, we would not expect these relationships to be a major source of support. However, there is some evidence, based on observational studies, that the complexity of young childrens' friendships may be underestimated.

This study sought to explore the young child's social network and resources for support from the child's perspective. We were primarily interested in the child's own perspective because perceptions of support have been shown to be critical to the effectiveness of the support given, and to be dependent, in part, on our social rules

and expectations about who should provide the support.

Questions:

There were three main question this study addressed:

1. What are the differences between 4- and 6-year-olds social networks (that is, how many and what kinds of relationships does the child consider to be important.)
2. What are the differences between 4- and 6-year-olds resources for support (that is, who do they turn to for support in different situations?)
3. What are the differences between 4- and 6-year-olds conceptions of support (that is, what are their reasons for choosing a supporter, and what kinds of support do they expect in different situations?)

Subjects:

There were 53 children, 24 4-year-old's and 29 6-year-old's, with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. They were predominantly white and from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. With the exception of 2 4-year-old's, all had at least one sibling. All were form 2-parent households. All the 4-year-old's attended daycare or preschool. The 6-year-old's were in public schools.

Procedure:

We looked at two kinds of support--emotional support and problem solving support--in 10 different relationship categories (see Table 1). Because we were very concerned about assessing these abstract concepts in children of this age, we used both close-ended response formats and semi-structured interview techniques. We also used playmobile figurines as concrete props the children could manipulate and talk

through. Further, we asked about real people in their lives, like Aunt Sally, instead of general or abstract relationship categories.

To assess their social network, we asked them to first think of all the people they knew at home, in school, in the neighborhood, and the relatives they had who did not live nearby. We then asked them to tell us, of all the people they knew, who were the people who were most special to them. To assess who they go to for support, we presented hypothetical stories about stressful situations common to young children and asked them who would help them feel better (emotional support condition), or help them solve the problem (problem solving support condition). We also asked them why they would turn to each person for support and what that person would do to help. All the data was collected during two home visits.

Results

In terms of the first question "Who do children include in their social networks", we found that 6-year-olds named significantly more special others than 4-year-olds and that within relationship categories, 6-year-olds named more adults such as neighbors and extended relatives, and more pets that 4-year-olds (see Table 2). Girls also named more people than boys. Girls named more school friends, other peers (neighbors, cousins) and other adults than boys (see Table 3). These results are congruent with previous research on young children's social networks.

The second question dealt with who children perceive they can turn to for emotional and problem-solving support. We expected that, overall, parents would be named most often for both kinds of support, but that 6-year-olds would name more

extraparental adults and peer relationships than would 4-year-olds. We found that, as expected, 6-year-olds named a significantly greater number of different relationship categories than 4-year-olds and they named more extraparental adults. However, 4- and 6-year-olds did not significantly differ on the number of peers named as supporters. Four-year-olds were more likely to report turning to no-one.

Our prediction that parents would be turned to most often for support was not confirmed. Although they were a top choice, they did not significantly differ from school friends. Further, between these top choices for support there were some interesting and complimentary patterns of results.

In terms of children's perceptions of support from mother, there was a significant age by type of support interaction (see Table 4). Four-year-olds saw mother as more of a source of problem-solving support than emotional support. With age, children significantly increased in their view of her as a source of emotional support. The age by sex by type of support interaction also approached significance, but I'd like to talk about that when I talk about school friends.

In terms of children's perceptions of father, there was a main effect for type of support. Children perceived father as more of a source of problem-solving support than emotional support. However, this was qualified by an age by type of support interaction (see Table 5). This interaction showed that although 4-year-olds were significantly more likely to turn to father for problem-solving support, 6-year-olds did not show a significant difference between the type of support received from father. Therefore, the pattern of results found for fathers is similar to that found for mothers

at age 4. But at age 6, children significantly increased in their view of mother as a source of emotional support while father stayed the same.

In terms of children's perceptions of support from school friends, there was a significant 3-way interaction of age by sex by type of support (see Table 6). Overall, results indicated that school friends, particularly for 4-year-old girls and 6-year-old boys, were significantly more of a source of emotional support than problem-solving support. At age 6, girls tended to decrease in their view of school friends as a source of emotional support and increase in their view of them as a source of problem-solving support. As you can see in Table 7, this is the opposite pattern found in the 3-way interaction that approached significance for mothers. Here, with age, girls increased in their view of mother as a source of emotional support, and decreased in their view of her as a source of problem-solving support. Boys increased in their view of her as providing both emotional and problem-solving support while they did not view school friends as a major source of problem-solving support at either age.

The importance of school friends as a source of support, particularly at age 4, was unexpected. One of the primary developmental tasks for children of this age is the formation of relationships with peers and others outside of the parent-child relationship. Therefore, these relationships would be in the very beginning stages of development. In addition, social cognitive theory and studies of children's friendship conception at this age indicate that friendships are based on momentary, proximal interaction rather than enduring qualities. One might expect, then, that at age four, peer relationships would be less mature and stable than those of older children, and

would not be a major source of support, especially emotional support.

However, it may be that it is just this developmental task (i.e., that of developing peer friendships) which brings these relationships into strong relief in comparison to their involvement with parents, and creates this complementary pattern of role expectations. If children are in the process of lessening their emotional dependence on and attachment to parents (particularly mothers), and are actively striving to develop relationships with peers, then these peer relationships would be of central importance in their socio-emotional landscape. Relative to peers then, parents would be forced (at least temporarily) into the background. In this light, it makes sense that the primary supportive role of peers would be in providing emotional support since they are in the process of developing emotional ties with peers. At age six, when peer relationships are more established and parental attachment is less threatening to emotional independence, mothers again become important sources of emotional support, along with peers.

Finally, the third question had to do with children's conceptions of support. we found that overall, children most often chose supporters for reasons relating to their own needs in the situation. However, with age, they were more likely to choose a supporter because of that person's competence or ability to help.

We also found that the types of behaviors they expected from the supporter differed by age, sex, and type of support. In the emotional support condition, 4-year-olds and girls were more likely to mention physical nurturance than were 6-year-olds or boys. In the problem-solving condition, 6-year-olds and girls were more likely to

name cooperative or joint forms of help while 4-year-olds and boys were more likely to expect the supporter to punish the offender. These results are fairly congruent with previous studies of children's helping behavior.

Conclusions

To conclude, overall, the results of this study suggest that peers may be an under-recognized source of support for young children and that some of the social cognitive theories of young children's conceptions of friendship may need to be re-examined. They also suggest that peer relationships may be important during times of stress, and that by age 6, other adults (neighbors, extended relatives) may also play important roles. More study of stressed populations of children is needed, however, before this conclusion is made.

References

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Furman, W. & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the personal relationships in their social networks. Developmental Psychology, 21, 6, 1016-1024.

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Table 1:

Relationship Categories

Used in Analysis

Adults

- Mother
- Father
- Grandparents
- Teachers
- Other Adults

(neighbors, aunts uncles, etc.)

Peers

- siblings
- School Friends
- Other Peers

(friends in neighborhood, cousins, etc.)

Other

- Pets/toys
- Nobody

Table 2:

Age Differences In Children's Social Networks

Age	Mean number of people named	F (1, 51)	Significance
4-years-old	16		
6-years old	20	8.21	p<.006

* 6-year-olds named significantly more other adults and more pets than 4-year-olds.

Table 3:

Sex Differences In

Children's Social Networks

Sex	Mean number of people named	F (1, 51)	Significance
Males	16		
Females	21	11.52	p<.001

* Girls named significantly more school friends, other peers and other adults than boys.

Table 4:

Children's Perceptions of Support from Mother: Support Scores by Age and Type of Support

		Type of Support	
		Emotional	Problem Solving
Age	4 y.o.	1.92	3.38
	6 y.o.	3.48	2.77

Table 5:

Children's Perceptions of Support from Father: Support Scores by Age and Type of Support

		Type of Support	
		Emotional	Problem Solving
Age	4 y.o.	1.79	2.79
	6 y.o.	1.95	2.10

Table 6:

Children's Perceptions of Support from School Friends:

Support Scores by Age, Sex, and Type of Support

		Type of Support	
		Emotional	Problem Solving
4 y.o.	males	2.20	1.67
	females	3.67	2.17
6 y.o.	males	2.84	1.66
	females	2.58	2.54

Table 7:

Children's Perceptions of Support from Mother:

Support Scores by Age, Sex, and Type of Support

		Type of Support	
		Emotional	Problem Solving
4 y.o.	males	1.83	3.00
	females	2.00	3.75
6 y.o.	males	3.38	3.66
	females	3.58	1.89